UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/C.12/1999/SR.32
24 November 1999

Original: ENGLISH

COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Twenty-first session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 32nd MEETING

Held at the Palais des Nations, Geneva,
on Wednesday, 17 November 1999, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Mrs. BONOAN-DANDAN

later: Mr. AHMED
(Vice-Chairperson)

CONTENTS

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS:

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (continued)

Third periodic Report of Bulgaria (continued)

This record is subject to correction.

Corrections should be submitted in one of the working languages. They should be set forth in a memorandum and also incorporated in a copy of the record. They should be sent within one week of the date of this document to the Official Records Editing Section, room E.4108, Palais des Nations, Geneva.

Any corrections to the records of the meetings of the Committee at this session will be consolidated in a single corrigendum to be issued shortly after the end of the session.

GE.99-45764 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS:

(a) REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES IN ACCORDANCE WITH ARTICLES 16 AND 17 OF THE COVENANT (agenda item 6) (continued)

Third periodic report of Bulgaria (HRI/CORE/1/Add.81; E/1994/104/Add.16; E/C.12/Q/BUL/1; written replies to the list of issues and additional statistics prepared by the Government of Bulgaria (documents without a reference number)) (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, the members of the delegation of Bulgaria resumed their places at the Committee table.

2. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria) said the delegation had organized its replies to Committee members unanswered questions into four basic groups: social security, protection of the child and family, living standards, and health care. If measured in absolute terms, the figures for social spending would be less than impressive. However, there had been a gradual increase in the proportion of the budget allocated to education, health care and social assistance between 1995 and 1999. Although the 2000 budget was still before Parliament, he did not envisage any significant departure from that trend.

3. The Refugee Act was a relatively new piece of legislation, an English synopsis of which Committee members had before them. While the Government was generally receptive to the idea of an optional protocol to the Covenant, its final position, which had been delayed by the necessary process of discussion in the various ministries and institutions, would be presented in Bulgaria's fourth periodic report.

4. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria), replying to questions from Mrs. Jiménez Butragueño and Mr. Texier, referred members to Tables 7a and 7c of the additional statistics for information concerning unemployed persons over 40 and the long-term unemployed. While there were no specific age-related programmes, she cited a number of recent special employment schemes for certain categories of adults, mentioned in paragraph 14 (1) of the written replies.

5. While unemployment benefits were inadequate for ensuring an acceptable standard of living, they were dependent on the resources of the Training and Unemployment Fund. The conditions governing early retirement were set forth in article 45 (a) of the Pensions Law. They included structural changes to a business; a 3-month interval between the last unemployment benefit payment and receipt of a pension; and payment totalling no more than half the minimum wage in force during the preceding 12 months.

6. She understood Mrs. Jiménez Butragueño's concern at the raising of the retirement age at a time when the country's unemployment situation was so dire. A draft bill on compulsory retirement was currently before Parliament in connection with the planned reform of the social security system. A higher retirement age was one of the requirements imposed on Bulgaria by the World Bank, and a condition for the country's accession to the European Union, whose

revised Social Charter it had already signed. The retirement age - generally 60 for women and 65 for men - was one of the highest in Europe, although there were special categories of the population who could retire at 45 and 55 respectively.

7. National Statistical Institute data for 1998 showed that the low ratio of people of working age to the general population placed severe strains on pension funds. Since, as the tables revealed, the real value of pensions and other social benefits was abysmally low, older people were induced to extend their working lives in order to maintain their standard of living. The same statistics showed that over half of retirees continued to work, earning a salary and drawing a pension simultaneously, a state of affairs that was grossly unfair to the young unemployed. The consequent decision to raise the retirement age had been taken in consultation with all the social partners, and the measure would be phased in gradually between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2008.

8. Ms. DIONEVA (Bulgaria), responding to a question from Mr. Antanovich, said the fact that compulsory education ended at 16 in Bulgaria did not preclude orphans from attending high school up to the age of 18. They received financial assistance for that purpose and were given priority for boarding places and for recruitment by various businesses. The latter, under article 58 of the Unemployment Protection and Employment Promotion Law, received financial incentives - calculated on the basis of the minimum wage and training expenses - to employ orphans, the disabled and other disadvantaged groups for 10 years, a period deemed adequate for their integration into society.

9. Attendance at high school was regulated by the Education Act, while university education was governed by a separate legal provision. State grants were available, and disadvantaged students could apply for income support. The social benefits received by orphans were generally higher than those received by other disadvantaged groups: the conditions were set out in articles 8, 9 and 10 of the Rules and Regulations for the implementation of the Social Assistance Act. They were calculated on the basis of the varying fundamental needs of the various population groups, and the basic minimum income was multiplied by a differentiated income coefficient of 1 for the general population, 1.2 for orphans and single mothers, and 1.5 for the disabled.

10. In reply to Mr. Grissa's question, she said that street children were a recent phenomenon in her country, the emergence of which had been masked under the previous centralized system. The legislation on the problem was less than rigorous. What was important was the measures the authorities were taking to combat it. Questions had been put to Bulgaria in that regard in connection with its application for accession to the European Union, and a national inter-ministerial commission on street children had been set up to address them. No reliable statistics were available, given the evolving nature of the phenomenon. However, the procedure involved temporary shelters, where the children received psychological care and were interviewed to determine why they were on the streets. Depending on the outcome, they were either returned to their families or placed in permanent shelters or special hostels.

11. Child labour was illegal and the Labour Inspectorate was authorized to prosecute businesses and families that violated the child labour laws. Four separate drafts of a law on the

rights of the child, prepared in the main by women's lobbies, had been circulated before the necessary common ground had been found and Parliament had passed the law, which contained a special provision on street children.

12. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria), responding to questions from Mr. Hunt and Mrs. Jiménez Butragueño, said that domestic violence against women was another fairly recent phenomenon and efforts were being made to find the best means of combating it. While legislative measures and sanctions were important, they did not suffice. The authorities set greater store by educating society as a whole through the media and awareness-raising activities on the part of women's and mothers' associations. A special hotline had been available to female victims of domestic violence since 1998. Paragraph 28 (2) (a) of the written replies set forth the legislative measures in force for protecting women, while paragraph 7 (1) provided examples of the corpus delicti specific to women.

13. To Mr. Texier's question concerning the dismissal of pregnant women, she replied that article 343 of the Labour Code - which also established protection for specific categories of employees, such as trade union officials - provided that employers could not dismiss pregnant women, women with children under three years of age, or those married to men performing compulsory military service. The prohibition was relative rather than absolute, since an employee could be dismissed on the authority of the Labour Inspectorate - a state of affairs that was negative if viewed from the pregnant woman's perspective but positive if considered in the general context of freedom of entrepreneurship provided for by the Constitution. In any event, an employer's freedom to dismiss was subject to explicit conditions. An employer with more than 10 staff could be obliged to dismiss one and hire a less efficient disadvantaged person. There was an ongoing debate to determine whether that clause of the Labour Code should be retained, abolished or expanded, in the interest of employer-employee equality in labour relations.

14. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria) said that a number of questions of a general nature had been asked regarding the right to an adequate standard of living: whether there was a growing trend of impoverishment, whether the situation of disadvantaged groups had improved, why the population was getting poorer and whether the system for determining the minimum wage was fair. Those were all issues subject to daily debate in Bulgarian society. The machinery for determining the minimum wage had already been described. As to the other questions, it had unfortunately to be admitted that the trend was undoubtedly towards greater poverty and that the situation of disadvantaged groups had not improved.

15. The question why the population was poorer could be debated at length. The fact of the matter was that Bulgaria had contracted massive loans, that the sums borrowed had not been spent wisely, and that the country must now pay. It was in that light that the definition of an adequate living standard needed to be viewed. In terms of a national economy, 10 or 20 years was not a very long time. At the start of the transition to a market economy in 1989, the country had already owed some US$ 11 billion in foreign debt. An "alternative" report prepared by Bulgarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to which, regrettably, his delegation's attention had been drawn only in the course of the current meeting, revealed that the current demographic ratio in Bulgaria was four dependants to one worker and that the cost of servicing the country's foreign debt was between US$ 500 million and US$ 1 billion a year.

16. Mr. GANTCHEV (Bulgaria), responding to the questions raised in connection with the right to food, said that the National Institute of Nutrition had found that Bulgarians suffered not from malnutrition but rather from irrational nutritional habits. Practical measures for improvement in that regard included a programme developed by the Ministry of Health to apply principles of rational nutrition throughout the country, especially in public catering establishments, and to educate the population of the municipalities in a healthy lifestyle. A health promotion programme related to the introduction of the health insurance system was to start on 1 January 2000 with a view to raising awareness of the importance of proper diet to health. Food quality was permanently monitored by the National Institute of Nutrition, working in close cooperation with the Consumer Protection Commission, according to nine specific criteria. In future, as a means of heightening public awareness, the ingredients of all packaged foods must be visibly displayed on the package in Bulgaria. The National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology also played a part in quality control. In addition there were a number of programmes for special groups, such as persons suffering from diabetes, and special shops where the food they needed could be obtained.

17. In regard to the right to housing, he noted that, according to the figures in paragraph 188 of in the report, out of some 8.4 million Bulgarians, 7.7 million lived in their own houses or apartments. That had been in 1994. The statistics for the last five years, given in Tables 10a and 10b of the additional statistics, showed a definite decline in new construction. One explanation of the decline was that demand, which was related to purchasing power, had also dropped. Current economic conditions had thus resulted in a general decline in quality as opportunities to buy new housing diminished.

18. As to the situation of homeless people in Bulgaria, there were for the moment only isolated cases. The assistance afforded depended on the category of person involved. Children, for example, were directed to temporary shelters and other institutions. As far as State reaction to homelessness was concerned, the major responsibility in terms of housing fell on the municipalities, which were in some cases able to provide housing for persons in need. Only the rich municipalities, however, were in a position to buy apartments for use by vulnerable groups. They still had the power to do so, however, and the criteria on which such action could be taken were specified in various pieces of legislation governing social assistance, municipal property and compensation of persons with long-term savings destined for housing. The latter system had existed under the old regime and there were currently a number of persons in that situation. The municipalities would need to bear in mind the priority that should be accorded to them in allocating any municipal housing. To sum up, there was not currently a serious shortfall, but the housing available was likely to remain of low quality during the period of transition.

19. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria) said that there was currently a twin-track system of health care in Bulgaria. The implementation of a new national health insurance system had started on 1 July 1999, when payment of insurance contributions to the National Health Insurance Fund had begun. Until the new system came into effect on 1 January 2000, the old system of public health care would continue. As to what kind of health-care measures were currently being implemented and what possibilities were open to the public in the interim, citizens were entitled to a free choice of and treatment by medical doctors and a dentist working in their respective primary health-care units, as well as the specialist services of an otolaryngologist and an ophthalmologist.

Those medical services and emergency services were currently free but would, after the introduction of the new system, be paid for out of the National Health Insurance Fund. In all other cases, the services would be paid for in accordance with the conditions and regulations laid down by the Ministry of Health. The public health-care system also included State sanitary control, health care for pregnant women, mothers and children, sanatorium treatment, medical controls on physical fitness activities, sports and tourism and campaigns against drug addiction, alcoholism and smoking.

20. As to the question whether there was sufficient provision for health care, in terms of human resources and hospital beds, provision was ample. The ratio of doctors and dentists to the population was higher than the average for the European Union. The picture was different in regard to financial resources. Not enough money was available in the State and municipal budgets to provide adequate care. The introduction of the new health insurance system had been delayed because the Fund's resources were not yet sufficient. The 6 per cent of income that people were required to pay had not proved adequate and the State was not in a position to subsidize the system any further. The period between 1 July and the end of 1999 had not, however, been wasted. The structure of the National Fund and the regional health insurance funds had been established and a start had been made on educating health-care providers and managers in the new system. Another important development had been the organization of education in promoting healthy lifestyles.

21. To the question whether the State would pay for medical care for students and retirees after the introduction of the insurance system, she said that in future, the State would pay only for emergency health care, psychological care and blood transfusions. Health insurance contributions would be obligatory for all citizens of Bulgaria, resident foreigners and refugees. The State would pay, however, for retired persons, students, the unemployed and certain socially disadvantaged persons. The contributions of persons living in establishments for disadvantaged persons would be paid by the State.

22. In response to the question about doctors' low pay, she said that other professionals, such as teachers, were also paid very little. One of the aims of the new health insurance system was to improve the situation of health-care providers. Discussions were currently under way on doctors' pay and the costs of medicaments. Representatives of the doctors, dentists and other providers would be engaging in salary negotiations with the Fund.

23. The special health establishments that existed for disadvantaged groups would be retained but would need to be improved. Under the current system, medicaments were provided free of charge to all children up to the age of three as well as to persons suffering from certain chronic illnesses. For elderly persons in particular, that assistance was very valuable. To the question about primary care, she said that primary health-care services were provided by clinics and polyclinics and, in the towns, by various hospitals. In the villages, these services were provided by health-care centres. Every person had access to a district doctor in his or her place of residence. There were also district gynaecologists, obstetricians, paediatricians and dentists. Dental services were provided at national and regional levels. Much dental care was now dispensed privately. Specialist outpatient services were commonly provided at polyclinics and hospitals, following referral by a district doctor. After the introduction of the new system, all

hospitals and polyclinics would be organized as commercial enterprises. Public health establishments would continue to provide emergency and psychological care and blood transfusions.

24. As far as the mental health of the nation was concerned, the statistics showed that mental disorders were on the increase in Bulgaria as in other eastern European countries in transition. Psychiatric patients were entitled to all the services provided to other patients and all the necessary drugs for those registered as in need of psychiatric care would be supplied free of charge. Even after the introduction of the new system, the State would retain responsibility for the mentally ill and all existing establishments for the mentally disabled would remain public, although private care would be allowed.

25. Mrs. JIMÉNEZ BUTRAGUEÑO asked whether the new Family Code would help to strengthen the family.

26. Mr. SADI said he understood that there had been a rapid rise in cardiovascular disease and cancer in Bulgaria, both of which were a reflection of poor general health conditions. He also wished to know whether the phenomenon of organized crime, which had arisen in many other countries in transition, had affected Bulgaria.

27. Mr. KOUZNETSOV said he had understood from the Bulgarian delegation that the State budget for the year 2000 had already been adopted. If that was the case, he would like a general picture of the budget in the social field. Was there any trend towards an increase in allocations and had funding been earmarked for social programmes? Could the Committee be sure that the budget would be fully implemented? The degree of implementation often varied and deadlines were not met. He would welcome a very specific answer.

28. Mr. RIEDEL suggested that in its fourth periodic report Bulgaria should consider some of the issues of concern that had been raised, such as social assistance, homelessness, disadvantaged people and primary health care. The country should aim to set itself benchmarks, against which it could measure what had actually been achieved, and which could serve as a basis for the Committee's discussion. It was pleasing to note that government control would be retained over essential mental health services alongside those which were to be privatized.

29. Mr. HUNT said that in its negotiations with international financial institutions Bulgaria should raise the issue of its binding international legal obligations under the Covenant. The fact that all financial arrangements must respect those obligations should be emphasized. The Covenant should not be seen as imposing onerous legal burdens, but rather as a means of assisting States parties in their negotiations with powerful non-State actors.

30. The CHAIRPERSON, endorsing Mr. Hunt's words, said that the Covenant was a very important instrument for the fulfilment of a State's obligations but also a means of affording protection and assistance to that State. It appeared that international financial institutions were not as yet accountable to human rights treaty bodies.

31. Mr WIMER ZAMBRANO said that the details provided regarding the Government's employment policy for elderly people were not sufficiently clear. What was government policy in that regard and what were the personal opinions of the delegation?

32. Mr. AHMED, endorsing Mr. Hunt's remarks, said that in that connection it was interesting to recall resolution 1998/12 adopted by the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in August 1998, in which the Sub-Commission urged United Nations agencies, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to at all times be conscious of and respect the human rights obligations of the countries with which they worked. In the same resolution, the Sub-Commission asked the Committee to include consideration of the human rights impacts of international and regional trade, investment and financial measures in their State reporting procedures.

33. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria), responding to the questions raised, said that families had been both weakened and strengthened during the current transition period. They had been weakened from a financial point of view but strengthened in terms of solidarity in the face of difficult circumstances. In that connection, the new family law introduced the concept of a marriage contract regulating financial relations between future spouses. A draft law on material support for families was also being discussed to supplement the current Social Assistance Act, the Special Act on Children's Allowances, and the Act on Birth Promotion. Parents were also eligible for monthly allowances providing them with assistance in extreme situations.

34. It had to be said that no special measures had been taken with regard to the employment of elderly people. It was the personal opinion of the delegation that the measures existing to assist adults in that sphere were insufficient. In fact, on account of their numbers, parents and grandparents currently constituted the most vulnerable group in society. Given that they had worked so hard to establish the current infrastructure and that their living conditions were inadequate, a great debt was owed to them.

35. Mr. GANTCHEV (Bulgaria) explained that the fight against corruption was one of the Government's highest priorities. On coming to power it had immediately adopted a strategy to combat organized crime. The implementation of the related programme was monitored every six months. The anti-corruption programme was also an important political consideration in the opening of accession negotiations with the European Union. That programme was central to guaranteeing basic rights and freedoms for all citizens.

36. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria), responding to the question raised by Mr. Kouznetsov, said that the budget for the year 2000 would most probably be adopted before the end of November. The expenditure devoted to education, health and social assistance would certainly not be reduced. As had been the case in the past two years, the budget would be fully implemented and no problems were anticipated. The strict financial discipline imposed by international creditors had to be respected. However, constant reference was made in negotiations to Bulgaria's obligations under the international instruments to which it was a party.

37. Mrs. JIMÉNEZ BUTRAGUEÑO stressed the need for the anti-corruption measures taken by the Bulgarian Government to be reflected in the Committee's concluding observations.

38. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria) said that a thirst for knowledge was a traditional attribute of the Bulgarian people. Article 53 of the Bulgarian Constitution proclaimed the right to education as a basic right for all citizens. Outlining statistics relating to the numbers who had completed the different levels of education in 1998, he said that the total number of people involved in the various levels was 1,389,513, most of whom were in general education and the remainder in special and technical institutions. While the percentage of females in the various levels of education increased with age, the total number of schools in rural areas showed a steady decrease. Likewise, the number of schools for physically disabled, mentally retarded and socially unstable children had also decreased from 270 in 1997-1998 to 240 in 1998-1999.

39. The number of students involved in higher education had risen slightly, despite the introduction, through the Higher Education Act, of compulsory annual tuition fees for all students at public higher education institutions. The Government hoped that would not represent a serious impediment to equal access by young people to such education. A very important element in the development of the educational system over the past year had been the adoption in 1999 of the Law on Professional Training and Professional Education. That Law provided a new basis for the system of professional orientation, vocational training and education of both children and adults.

40. Finally, the right to exercise national and universal cultural values and the freedom of artistic, scientific and technical creation set forth in article 54 of the Constitution were regulated and guaranteed by current legislation. Interest in, knowledge, preservation and development of the rich cultural heritage were traditional values of Bulgarian citizens. Notwithstanding the overall deterioration in the economic situation and the financial restrictions imposed, the Government, together with cultural and scientific organizations, was making efforts to cater for those interests. Mention should also be made of the recent project entitled "Increasing citizens' participation in the development of community cultural centres", which offered possibilities for more active participation in cultural life, the development of national culture and access to common cultural values.

41. Mr. CEVILLE, referring to the subject of access to higher education, said that according to a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report the tuition fees for higher education in Bulgaria were fairly high, representing 43 per cent of the average annual wage in 1994. There appeared to be a contradiction between the principle of accessibility of higher education and the introduction of tuition fees. What action had been taken to reaffirm the basic principles of physical, economic and non-discriminatory access? He would also welcome information on the possibility of access to higher education for minority groups, in particular the Roma and Turkish minorities.

42. Mr. GRISSA confessed to confusion regarding the relationship between the statistics provided in the report and those submitted during the current session. It appeared that only 8 per cent of pupils entering primary education successfully completed their studies. What was the exact relationship between the different statistical tables? What was the reason for the low number of pupils studying at the different levels cited in the tables most recently submitted? Was the increase in the number of private schools the result of a decline in the quality of education provided in State schools?

43. Mr. Ahmed, Vice-Chairperson, took the Chair.

44. Mr. ANTANOVICH said that, in the context of the United Nations Decade for Human Rights Education adopted by the General Assembly in 1994, the Committee had requested information on that matter. Bulgaria had stated that human rights teaching had expanded in universities and among public officials. Was that also the case for the armed forces and the police? Was a distinction drawn between officers and ordinary soldiers in such training?

45. In addition, information should be provided as to whether any specific national institutions existed for the preservation of minority cultures. In that regard, he noted that in 1997 the President of Bulgaria had stated that there was no Macedonian minority in the country.

46. Mr. CEAUSU said it was clear from the third periodic report that, in comparison to the wages paid to other public servants, the remuneration offered to teachers was continually decreasing. In 1994, teachers had ranked fourteenth in a list of 16 government-registered sectors. The more recent information provided indicated that the disparity had grown still wider. Had that fact given the authorities cause for concern? It should be ascertained whether there were any budgetary possibilities for increasing teachers' wages, given that the salaries of other State enterprise workers in the gas, electricity and commercial sectors had risen sharply. Those planning the budget should be acutely aware that the future of the nation depended on the level of education of those currently studying in schools.

47. Although the report furnished ample information on the Bulgarian education system as a whole, there was no mention of teaching in the mother tongues of national minorities such as the Turks and Roma. Were there any government programmes to promote such teaching at primary and higher levels? What opportunities were there for the national minorities to develop and enjoy a cultural life through their own mother tongue, in compliance with articles 13 and 15 of the Covenant and article 54 (1) of the Bulgarian Constitution?

48. Mr. THAPALIA, referring to statistics provided by the Bulgarian delegation and information from the Committee on the Rights of the Child and its NGO sources, expressed concern at the recent considerable increase in the drop-out rates of pupils at primary and secondary levels in Bulgaria, which could hardly be explained solely by the declining birth rate over the last decade. What were the causes and what would be the consequences of the increase? What was the basic salary for teachers and was there a significant difference between the salaries paid in private and State-run institutions?

49. Since 1999 was the International Year of Older Persons, was the Bulgarian Government taking any steps to improve the situation of its elderly population or to take advantage of the knowledge, culture and spiritual values such persons could transmit to other Bulgarians? Lastly, did the Government envisage any human rights education for older judges appointed prior to 1989?

50. Mr. RATTRAY said that while Bulgaria was justifiably proud of its high literacy rate and educational standards, there was undeniably a decline in the number of pupils attending schools, particularly at secondary level. He wondered whether that was perhaps a reaction to the absence of employment opportunities, to the type of employment opportunities available, or to the

imposition of fees. What steps was the Bulgarian Government taking to ensure the full realization of the right to education and the development of the human personality in accordance with article 13 of the Covenant?

51. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria) said that the main reason for the decline in the number of pupils attending schools was undoubtedly the dramatic fall in the birth rate. On account of the current economic difficulties, fewer Bulgarian families were having any children at all. Those that did choose to have children had only one child and a family with two children was now considered a large family. Naturally one of the consequences of fewer children in the education system was a fall in demand for teachers. Bulgarian teachers earned a pittance and were thus attracted to the private system, which might offer better pay conditions. Of course, private schools were a recent initiative, and as they often proved to be commercially unviable, offered little in the way of job security. Every effort was made by the Government to maintain high standards in State-run schools.

52. There could be no doubt that the process of democratization had had an overwhelmingly positive impact on the development and enjoyment of the cultural life of national minorities. All the different ethnic groups in Bulgaria were now allowed to exercise their cultural rights, something which had not been possible before 1989. In that respect, the Bulgarian Government was setting a good example for other countries in the Balkan region, further evidenced by its signature of the Council of Europe's framework Convention for the protection of national minorities.

53. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria) said that, regrettably, she would be unable to answer all the questions on education and cultural rights in the short time available. In response to Mr. Ceausu's question, she said that information on the teaching of minority languages in Bulgarian schools had been provided in paragraph 301 of the report (E/1994/104/Add.16), but that it reflected the situation as at 1995. Since then, the programme referred to in that paragraph had been implemented. The main minority languages taught were Turkish and Hebrew. There was a large Jewish community in Bulgaria, even larger than the Roma one. Teaching in the Roma mother tongue was slightly more problematic owing to the specific characteristics of that language. A number of programmes had been introduced by the Ministry of Science and Education to combat the drop-out problem; programmes targeted at national minorities included the "Education of Roma in Central and Eastern Europe" programme.

54. She rejected the assertion that the introduction of fees would restrict access to higher education. Education was one of the most important values in Bulgarian society, as was borne out by statistics showing the very high percentage of the population in higher education. The fees varied according to the faculty chosen, but did not represent 43 per cent of the average minimum wage. Certainly some Bulgarians would look back on the good old days when education was generally free, but there was no alternative - the current economic climate necessitated the imposition of such fees. In the past the only students who had had to pay for their university education were those who had not obtained sufficiently good results in the competitive entrance exam. Since the fees had been introduced only very recently, several years would need to elapse before their impact could be properly assessed. However, according to official information available, the number of university applicants had increased during the current academic year.

55. A number of financial support schemes were available to students who were unable to pay their own fees. Apart from university scholarships there was also a student loan system, but very few students had so far availed themselves of it, which suggested that they were able to supplement their income through temporary employment.

56. As far as human rights education for the police, armed forces and judges was concerned, information on the subject had already been given in the delegation's written submissions. One noteworthy recent development, however, was the establishment of a training centre for judges.

57. Information on the salaries of teachers and other employees in the public and private sectors was given in Table 8a of the additional statistics. The reason why other public-sector employees earned higher salaries than teachers was that those sectors were profit-making. The Bulgarian Government recognized the important role of teachers in society. However, their salaries were financed by the State and municipal budgets and, in the present economic climate, it was not possible to improve their situation.

58. The national minorities enjoyed the same opportunities as other Bulgarians to exercise their cultural rights. There were special cultural centres for the Roma and ethnic Turkish communities. Musical and other artistic activities for the development and preservation of minority culture and languages were organized in the "cultural homes".

59. Mr. GANTCHEV (Bulgaria) said that the Bulgarian Police Academy had been one of the first police academies in the Balkan region to establish a human rights training centre. Since 1997 more than 1,000 trainee and working police officers had been trained in human rights and refugee law, with the support of the Council of Europe. The police academy had also organized a number of regional seminars with representatives from Turkey, Greece, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and Serbia. Agreements had also been signed between the Ministry of the Interior, the armed forces and the Bulgarian Red Cross for the training of members of the armed and police forces in international humanitarian law.

60. Mrs. JIMÉNEZ BUTRAGUEÑO asked why there was no mention of women in the statistics provided on vocational training institutes, despite the fact that there were more female than male students in higher education.

61. Mr. CEVILLE said that his remarks about fees for higher education were based on information contained in a UNESCO report published in 1996.

62. Mr. CEAUSU said that according to paragraph 301 of the report, the teaching of mother tongues other than Bulgarian was not permitted in State-run schools. That was not in keeping with the Bulgarian Government's obligations under the framework Convention for the protection of national minorities. It was worth noting that if State-run enterprises such as electricity supply companies were profit-making, that was because they exercised a monopoly at the expense of consumers, including teachers.

63. Mrs. SREDKOVA (Bulgaria) said that information on the representation of women at different levels of education had been provided in the introductory statement by the head of the

delegation. She failed to understand how UNESCO could make such claims about fees for higher education in 1994 since university fees had not been introduced in Bulgaria until 1999. Perhaps the report was referring to the cost of private schools. In reply to Mr. Ceausu, she stressed that Bulgarian was the only compulsory language in State schools; national minorities could, however, study their mother tongue as an optional subject.

64. Mr. DRAGANOV (Bulgaria) said that the Bulgarian delegation had done its best to provide the Committee with as much information as possible in response to a very large number of questions. He thanked the secretariat for drawing its attention to the "alternative" report prepared by Bulgarian NGOs on the situation in Bulgaria, which the Bulgarian Government would be studying carefully. While the Bulgarian Government was proud of its achievements it readily admitted that there were many problems to be overcome. However, under the circumstances he believed the Government was doing its very best, with the resources available, to achieve progressively the full realization of the economic, social and cultural rights protected by the Covenant. The Committee's suggestions and recommendations would be duly taken into account.

65. The CHAIRPERSON said that he had been greatly impressed by the frankness, thoroughness and seriousness of purpose of the Bulgarian delegation and by the fact that it had endeavoured to answer all the questions raised. On behalf of the Committee he conveyed his thanks to the members of the delegation and wished them every success in the future.

66. The Bulgarian delegation withdrew.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.